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A Man About Town

JOHN WILSON
ERIC SCHWARTAU

Illustration by SEAN SUCHARA

Wildfire smoke from Canada has enveloped New York City. The sky is an eerie orange, reminiscent of Denis Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049*. *NYRA* columnist Eric Schwartau wears an old N95 mask and breathes heavily as he approaches the Ridgewood, Queens, residence of John Wilson, which features prominently in his HBO series, *How To with John Wilson*. *(Season Three premieres today.) He clicks the digital buzzer marked "Wilson, 2nd floor."*

ERIC SCHWARTAU: John!

JOHN WILSON: Come inside before it's too late.

ES: Oh, my god, I can't believe I made it. And you're watching *Blade Runner 2049*.

JW: It smells so crazy outside.

ES: I felt like I had to pull out the old N95. OK, so I already started recording to do a preamble about me walking up to your house during this apocalypse, but this is not a Diane Sawyer type of thing. Anything you say, it's safe with me.

JW: Okay. Do you want a seltzer?

ES: I would love a seltzer. I feel like in the show you portray your apartment as such a depraved space. It's actually really cute.

JW: Well, yeah. I try to only shoot certain corners. I can show you what corners I tend to usually shoot.

ES: Abject corners?

JW: No one lived up here for decades. I didn't really change anything, so it's got all of the original details.

ES: You have some architecture in here. The MetLife Building.

JW: That was my Halloween costume this year. It's one of my favorite buildings.

ES: That's so architectural of you. Do you know that photo from the 1930s of all these architects dressed up as buildings? It's in Rem Koolhaas's book *Delirious New York*, I think.

JW: Yeah. I know the exact one.

ES: Was that your inspiration?

JW: Partially. I have that book over here somewhere. But, yeah, that was a dream group costume, but I couldn't get anyone else to do it.

ES: A group costume of one.

JW: I had a box that was about the size of the MetLife Building, proportionally. It's an iconic part of the skyline that I don't see appreciated as much. Also, my dad worked for MetLife for decades, so there's a family connection. And I noticed they changed their logo recently, which kind of bummed me out. I wanted to preserve the old logo in my own little way.

ES: OK, a lot of thought went into this costume.

JW: People just think, oh, ha ha. But no, no.

ES: It went through this phase of being universally hated because everyone was aghast that they put it on top of Grand Central, at the end of Park Avenue. But recently there's been a reassessment of it.

JW: Yeah, things that were once loathed coming back in vogue—like the obsession with brutalism. Preservation is such a huge project of the show. I just want to preserve as much of the city as I can on video, specifically the stuff that feels more timeless. There's so much hideous architecture being built in the city now, more than I've seen in my lifetime. But we shoot the new stuff sometimes because, over time, everything becomes interesting no matter what. It's just kind of the rule.

ES: So, how is homeownership going for you?

JW: It's been great. My best friends in the world live in the apartments beneath that I rent out. Materially, my life here hasn't really changed that much. I mean, I was just a renter here before, and now I just pay a mortgage. But I have to deal with all this crazy homeowner stuff now. The basement continues to flood every couple months and needs to go—

ES: Do you have a pump?

JW: No. That's what everyone asks. The pump is not the solution.

ES: Sorry, I'm not a homeowner.

JW: No, no, it's OK. It's OK. And this is not the first time I've snapped at someone for suggesting it. I've had to deal with these constant floods, termites, and other ant problems. But it's been nice. It's cool, because everything in this grid here is historically preserved, which is what all the little brown street signs mean, which I didn't know at first. Everything here is the right height. There's a very human scale to everything. It feels like a set of New York. Ridgewood has some of the best sight lines of anywhere in the city.

ES: The roads start crisscrossing around here in a very European way.

JW: Yeah, there's a lot of diagonals, so there's a ton of V-shaped properties and weird ways to get lost.

ES: What is it about New York that lends itself to the way you see the world?

JW: I guess New York is a really great setting. New York resets itself every day in so many ways.

ES: Today it's *Blade Runner* apocalypse.

JW: Yeah, whether it's environmental catastrophe or just the commuters or tourists. It's just so rapid here. Everything has this temporary but also timeless quality to it. When you look at the imagery, you recognize it, but you don't. Transient things are often my favorite subjects. There's just so much of that here.

ES: Transient things like scaffolding.

JW: Yeah, like scaffolding or even just the price of things or advertisements or technology. I guess there's a bit of that in every city, but there's something that has a really unique quality to it here. And also, every kind of person is represented here.

ES: You've spent a lot of time walking around the city with a camera. The speed of walking is quite slow, and you're talking about the pace of change in New York being quite fast. Is walking important to how you think about seeing?

JW: You're saying that I walk slow?

ES: Yes, and could you please get out of my way, because I'm late for my interview with John Wilson.

JW: I try to walk around in other cities, and I don't get the same kind of texture as I do here. The second unit shooters have to walk a lot more than I do sometimes, because sometimes they're shooting eight hours a day, every day, for the show.

ES: I don't know what a second unit is. Perhaps you could slow walk me through how an episode of *How To with John Wilson* gets made.

JW: I'll come up with a concept focusing on scaffolding or parking, and then I'll write a rough outline of what I want to cover, like alternate-side parking, and then I'll give the second unit teams a scavenger hunt list. They just shoot video. So they go out, and they have to knock stuff off the list of things that are thematically tied to the episodes.

ES: Which neighborhoods do you film in the most?

JW: I usually like Midtown and the Lower East Side and kind of Chinatown. Midtown has the highest turnover of people, and no one's really paying attention to you. The Lower East Side has got a good look, and there's always something a little off happening there. I used to try to tell all the unit people exactly where to go. I would say, "OK, you go to Jackson Heights, you go to Harlem, you go to Staten Island," or something. But eventually we got a map of New York and we would just throw a dart at it, and wherever it landed, they would actually go there, even if it was a really weird area. But that randomizer effect made it so that you saw new things, because you'd never been there before. Because if you keep walking the same streets over and over again, everything just starts to look identical.

ES: So you have a map of New York with dart holes in it?

JW: Yeah.

ES: Do you have a list of where to go for certain things? Like Jackson Heights for example?

JW: For this season we were looking for a bunch of Poland Spring bottles filled with urine. So, you know, where the cabs wait. And the highest density of them is over there.

ES: What are some other scavenger hunt items?

JW: I wanted them to get funny street sign names. So you spend time on Google Maps and you see what might be a funny name. We have a collective memory now as a team. So if I'm asking for doors to nowhere, a lot of time people will just remember seeing one somewhere and just go straight to it. But I also encourage them to just film whatever they want.

ES: How many people do you have going out and filming?

JW: Four teams every day. It's usually Nellie Kluz, Britni West, Chris Maggio, Leia Jospé, and Nathan Truesdell, and they each have a field producer with them, so they go out and shoot, and then once they're done getting a shot, the field producer will go up and get a release from the person that was in the shot, if you see their face. I'll go out to film more interview-based footage. For example, if I'm looking for a noisy apartment, a producer will door-knock apartments on Myrtle near the M and see who wants to talk. There's a lot of rejection there.

ES: How do most people react?

JW: You can tell within a fraction of a second whether or not someone is going to be open to a video camera being anywhere near them. And if they're not OK with it, then I usually just keep it at my hip and move on. I try to keep it midlevel, and if they don't object to that, then I'll raise it slowly and gauge their comfort level. It's a way of communicating something without really having to say anything. That's how I try to gauge consent in the moment. And that usually works pretty well.

ES: Most New Yorkers understand that everything they're doing in public is being seen by someone.

JW: A lot more people than you think are just exhibitionists or will take any opportunity to tell a story.

ES: I find what you're doing very refreshing in the age of the front-facing camera content creator.

JW: I hate that.

ES: You're really not getting any context. There's something dishonest about it.

JW: I feel like it's such a waste of an image a lot of the time. I wanted to try to take the vanity out of the show and just have it be purely outward facing.

ES: But the show is still very personal.

JW: Yeah, I'm not going to say I took the ego out of it, because obviously the ego was the engine for a lot of the show.

ES: I learn so many details from your personal life watching the show.

JW: But don't you ever wish that you could just have everyone learn something about you at the same time and you never have to do it one-on-one?

ES: Yes, and actually, I'm going to send you my TV show pitch, *How To with Eric Schwartau*. Speaking of "yes, and," I'm curious if there's a method to how you escalate the situations you find yourself in on the show?

JW: You basically start with a very mundane topic and then you take the first exit ramp that you can and just follow that road until it ends. A rule we operated with for all three seasons is that the farther away that you get from the subject matter, the funnier and more interesting it is. If you're talking with someone about ice cream and then they show you some weird sex swing they have, you just want to stay on that track for as long as you can and try to see if it has any relevance to what the initial topic was. So you just have to say yes to everything.

ES: And suddenly you're filming a guy in bed stretching his foreskin [as happens in an episode from Season Two].

JW: A lot of the time I will shoot something thinking it's for one episode, and then by the time I get to the end of that road, it's a perfect metaphor for something in another episode. Everything we have planned out ends up getting swapped around and put into different episodes anyway, because, again, the farther away you get from the original topic, the more illuminating the actual message becomes.

ES: Do you go around by yourself, or do you have a producer with you?

JW: I'll usually have a van of people that are pretty close by that have sound or are just there recording.

ES: So it's like an FBI sting operation?

JW: Yeah, so I'll just be a Mr. Magoo, doing whatever, and then there'll be people tracking me. And I'll dip in and out of the van sometimes if I need a battery or something. But I try to keep the footprint very, very small, so that if you see me, you usually only just see me. And you don't see any evidence of any other kind of production, because that starts to change the way that people receive you.

ES: It gets in the way of the reality of the situation or the ability for things to feel natural?

JW: You can't be as nimble if it's a big production. And, yeah, it also affects the way that people act on camera. If it's just me, they have nowhere else to look. If there's someone behind you, they're always looking for that person's approval. So it's important that it's a really intimate thing. One of my favorite documentarians, Nick Broomfield, always does his own sound. He will have a camera guy with him but you always see him on camera with a boom mic talking to the subjects. I like removing all kinds of artifice from the situation. In a lot of documentaries, you're supposed to ignore the fact that there's a camera person there, which I think is so weird. Are they supposed to pretend you're not there? That's not real.

ES: It’s unnatural.

JW: Yeah, it’s more funny the more they acknowledge that you’re there. A lot of people still have no idea what the show is, and I’ll get through an entire interview and they’ll be like, “Oh, so who is the host?” And I’ll be like, “Oh, I’m the host.” And they’re like, “What? You couldn’t afford a cameraperson?” And I’m just like, “Oh, no, I just really prefer it. I like to do it.” They thought that I was just a cameraperson that was about to lose their job because of how talkative I was being and ruining every shot.

ES: So you’re a control freak.

JW: Yeah.

ES: Where does that come from?

JW: I don’t know. I’ve always just been very particular about my space and especially my video work. I would always micromanage my room growing up. And I feel like I’ve done the same here. During Covid, I threw out every single object I had that I didn’t like.

ES: And yet, I’m looking around at so many objects.

JW: I mean, there’s a bunch of junk in here. I have no use for so much of this stuff, but I just like to look at it. Whenever I have writer’s block, I’ll look at every single word in the apartment just to see what might spark an idea.

ES: That also feels like the show’s aesthetic. You’re capturing a lot of signage.

JW: Yeah, it’s kind of a collage.

ES: I see you have “I hate my job,” “video freelancer,” “naughty footage,” and “fearsome flush” cut out of newspapers and taped all over your desktop.

JW: Well, I have a whole file over here. I don’t know what these are for, really.

ES: “Super sex,” “senior blood floods.”

JW: “Dark force at work.” I feel like that could go up on my workstation at some point.

ES: “Ridgewood man.” That’s you.

JW: I hide them around the apartment.

ES: Can you talk about your notetaking? I know you keep a record of everything that happens in your life.

JW: Every single day is accounted for from 2008 until 2023, which is very weird, but sometimes you’re just like, “Oh, what did I do after that, really?” It’s like, “Oh, this really traumatic thing happened in the afternoon, and then I went to go eat a burrito somewhere.”

ES: It feels like an infinite amount of information.

JW: I don’t have the best memory, which has been a problem in friendships and relationships before. And I feel like both the camera and written logs of things are really useful tools for making up for what I lack. I can look back at any day, just any one of them in this little grid, and I can remember it so vividly. It’s mostly really boring stuff, but it all has some purpose and can be repurposed in a collage, or I find meaning in it later, you know? A bad application of this is that I’ve used it to win arguments with a partner before. And by the time I’m pulling out one of these books, I’ve already lost. Yeah.

ES: What type of buildings are you attracted to? You film a lot of buildings that look like faces in your show, for example.

JW: I like density. That's what's so nice about the city, I guess. There's a lot of amazing houses in Queens. Just very bizarre architecture. Just going around Ozone Park or certain parts of Jamaica or places like that.

ES: So you're interested in more of a lowercase *a* architecture.

JW: Buildings that have too many windows in a weird spot, or that have been frankensteined over the years, or really gaudy mansions in Neponsit. I like very strange architecture like that. Or buildings that look like faces.

The Fair theater in Jackson Heights

Courtesy John Wilson

ES: This reminds me of what you were saying about the transience of New York. Being able to see the progression of a building through time.

JW: The patchwork stuff in New York is always some of the most interesting. There's this movie theater near LaGuardia called The Fair. It's maybe the most beautiful theater I've ever seen in New York. But it's a cruising spot, and you go in and you pay whatever, twenty bucks, and then there's a gigantic ornate old theater playing like a Cary Grant movie or something. And then maybe a dozen smaller offshoot theaters where there are sex workers, and it's all men.

ES: So, what were you doing there?

JW: I knew that it was a cruising spot. I could tell from the outside, but I wanted to go in because I needed to see what was inside. There were Christmas lights everywhere. It's so gorgeous. There's a rule where if there's a porno theater, they have to be playing at least one real movie so that they can show the rest of the other hardcore stuff. It was the closest to *Taxi Driver* New York that I've ever seen in today's New York. I actually left because I felt bad not contributing to the scene there. And I think people could tell that I was just there to gawk, in a way.

ES: You seem interested in the way individuals adapt spaces to meet their needs.

JW: There is so much uniformity in New York, which is beautiful, but it's the slight variations that make it interesting. There's a lot of architecture shots in the show. Sometimes architecture can be a dirty punch line or a visual gag.

ES: But it feels like it's always pieces of buildings. I don't ever feel like I'm getting an entire building. You like to highlight details that are overlooked or underappreciated.

JW: That's the idea. For the upcoming season, I shot this place, Phil's Stationary, in Midtown somewhere, and it's just one of the most gorgeous storefronts ever. And you can already feel it disappearing. I was just so glad we could fit this into the show, because it's like, "OK, good. I feel like you preserved it. Good." It's in the show, and it'll never disappear now, in a way.

ES: That relates to what you were saying about taking notes. If you can capture it, you can remember it later, and it helps jog your memory and brings it back to life.

JW: There's a lot of loss in New York. I wish I could have seen something that looked like this that was shot in the '60s or '70s. Actually, one film that inspired us from that era is *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*.

ES: Oh, William Whyte. That's a classic for an urban studies major like myself.

JW: It's the best. It does everything I want a movie to do. There's a lot of data in it, and it's visually exciting, and it's a good time capsule, but he also editorializes and says funny things, which is nice.

ES: You mentioned you had a copy of *Delirious New York*. What are some other influences of yours?

JW: A lot of documentaries. One of my favorites is *The Decline of Western Civilization Part II: The Metal Years*. It's this amazing documentary about hair metal from 1988. I love documentaries that were shot at the time. That's always the richest kind of content. A lot of people are afraid of trying to figure out the story as it's happening because there are too many X factors. But that's what excites us on the show.

ES: You're perusing your bookshelf. What's that book?

JW: *Love Thy Neighbor's Wife* by Gay Talese. It's one of my favorite books ever. It's all about a history of sexuality in America.

ES: Okay. Hot.

JW: He puts himself in the middle of this polyamorous community.

ES: Did they make a documentary about it?

JW: No, but they did make a doc of *The Voyeur's Motel*, which is his most recent book. It's a real story about a guy who owned a hotel and he had a little catwalk above all the rooms. He would peek in and watch the guests and masturbate. That reminds me of an amazing *New Yorker* article from the '90s called "Thy Neighbor's Life" by Bill Buford. It's all about how the author was watching a couple, and then eventually saw them socially at a party and then told them that he could see them. He thought it would be a nice way of bonding but it really freaked them out.

ES: My neighbor just put up curtains. I was offended.

JW: Bill Buford also wrote my other favorite book, *Among the Thugs*, which is one of the best nonfiction novels ever. It's about this one guy who puts himself in the middle of this community of soccer hooligans in Europe. It's an absolutely brutal, sadistic environment that he puts himself in. It's all first person. The book just escalates and escalates and never stops.

ES: Do you identify with this way of documenting?

JW: He really puts himself at the center of it. And it feels like there's real danger. And that's what I want to do with the show, whenever we have the opportunity to, is actually make you feel like this is happening in real time. And when I go to the Bang Energy guy's house, I'm actually walking up and just opening the door.

ES: When I was talking about this interview to my editor, he referred to you as an "inadvertent architecture critic." Do you see yourself in that way?

JW: Yeah, that's cool. There's an episode this season all about noise in New York City. And that fits in with the architecture too—how thin people's walls are or the garbage chutes in those really new, tall buildings that make bullet sounds. As garbage comes down past your apartment, it sounds like a cannonball.

ES: I learn so much from you.

JW: It's hard to motivate myself to do independent research sometimes if it's not being used for something specific. So filming is always a good excuse to be productive or to obsess over certain laws or certain rhythms of the city.

ES: You're giving yourself an assignment.

JW: I was dating someone who lives in Los Angeles and I was thinking of making a movie about how to like LA, because I have a hard time with that place, just from a civic design perspective, and it became a point of tension.

ES: What is it about Los Angeles that you don't like, specifically?

JW: I don't like the way it's designed at all. I don't like the fact that I feel helpless there. I try to walk around; it just doesn't work the same way. The street life is just not the same. It's weird.

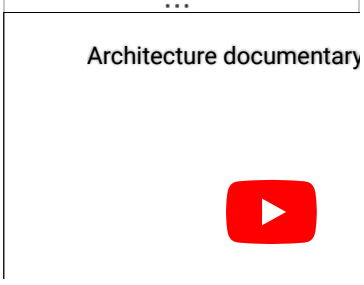
ES: Yeah, it's pretty dead. Everything's behind closed doors. It's not about the street, it's about the compound.

JW: I've never really been invited to a house party, so I don't know.

ES: A lot of gatekeeping. Season Three is going to get you invited to more parties.

JW: I'm learning to like LA.

ES: Have you seen *Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles*? *He's an architecture critic, and he drives around Los Angeles in a car and extols the virtues of driving around Los Angeles in a car.*



JW: Wait. Are you kidding me? Oh my god.

ES: It's basically William Whyte, but without the social life or the small urban spaces.

JW: The only other city I really visit is New Orleans. I go there once or twice a year, and it's just so beautiful. Everything is the right height, and the culture is so rich. But I never really like filming down there, because I don't really have a complicated relationship with it. I've been in New York for so long that I feel comfortable criticizing it or lampooning it, while in other cities, I haven't earned that as much, so I feel like I'd be a little more meek. I just want to make sure that it's coming from the right place and that I'm the right person to be saying whatever I'm saying. But I think I might be expanding to other cities.

ES: That's exciting. The stories you tell feel interwoven with your own personal experience, so you can bring that anywhere, in a certain sense.

JW: Yeah. But I'm also excited to not have something personal attached to it. But that might be hard, because I can't help myself a lot of the time.

ERIC SCHWARTAU IS AN ASPIRING CHATBOT.

JOHN WILSON IS A DOCUMENTARIAN BASED IN QUEENS.

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